Online Peer Violence – Reflections on the Example of Recirculating Nude Images and Cyberbullying

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The Meaning of Digital Media for Digital Natives[1]

Recent studies on the online behaviours of young people indicate that digital media constitutes an inextricable part of their lived experiences (mpfs, 2021). They no longer differentiate between analog and digital. Digital media are, consequently, a meaningful social and socialising space for the younger generation, which significantly influences their personal development. This space is characterised by a rapid change in information and communication technologies and an omnipresence of media. Not least because of the wide range of possibilities (e.g. gaming, dating, chatting), digital media have become *the* primary pastime. Accordingly, from a young age, children and adolescents are constantly confronted with information, advertising and communication. They use media-based technology in everyday life to meet others, to communicate, to present themselves, to obtain information and to be entertained (e.g. music, videos, films, shopping). They acquire new knowledge and form values, opinions and behaviour patterns.

Developmental Stages in Adolescence

From this fluid transition between the online and offline world, it follows that central developmental stages also take place digitally/medially. Adolescence is a time for questioning and examining values, for testing and - associated with this - for crossing boundaries, including with risky behaviours. The digital world offers an additional domain in which a young person can explore their own values and norms. One of the main stages in development is the separation from one's legal guardians. The exclusion of one's guardians from the digital environment takes place almost automatically by selecting certain platforms (e.g. Snapchat, TikTok) and corresponding privacy settings (Oerter & Montada, 2008, klicksafe, 2020). At

[1] The coming of age and the childhood experiences of young adults of the so-called Generation Y or Millennials are shaped by the implicit presence and everyday use of digital technologies. It is in this context that one speaks of "digital natives" (Tuider, 2019).

the same time, young people's relationships and contacts are coordinated on more platforms and in front of a larger "audience". Contacts within a circle of friends/peer group are made through feedback in the form of likes, comments, etc. As a result, young people have to learn to distinguish between "real friends" and "acquaintances". New dimensions are added to relationships and families via smartphones, and chats or video make it possible to maintain a permanent connection, even when people are physically separated. This diverse range of possible uses appeals to children and adolescents, but it sometimes makes them vulnerable to the intrusive intentions of others.

Risks in Digital Spaces

Although social media have positive effects as spaces for experiences and as media for exchange and identity formation, the risks must neither be overlooked nor downplayed. The anonymity and easy accessibility of the internet can be used to commit boundary violations, assaults and also criminal acts - even by peers. Children and adolescents give information about themselves, their lives and people in their social circles without hesitation. Due to insufficient experience and underdeveloped risk awareness, as well as the many risks and types of dangers, it is particularly important to support young people in recognising threatening content and strategies and in learning suitable protective measures.

Forms of digital violence

Discriminatory, sexist speech/commentary on social media and gaming platforms, messenger services	Confrontation with sexual images (e.g. **Dickpics)** or **pornographic recordings** without permission
Unauthorised editing of photographic posts	**Identity misuse** in digital spaces
Recirculating Nudes: Threatening the non-consensual dissemination of intimate messages, images and video recordings, for example as revenge	**Cyber grooming**: planning and preparation for sexual advances towards children and adolescents. Usually with the production and dissemination of

(**Revenge Porn**) or with extortive intentions (**Sextortion**)	abuse images and so-called child pornography.

The following comprehensive definition encompasses the diverse forms and phenomena of violence in the digital space – primarily those of a sexualised nature: “Sexualised violence with the use of digital media is [...] to be understood as a collective term that encompasses sexualised boundary violations, assaults and criminally relevant forms of sexualised violence that are initiated, perpetrated, accompanied or maintained by digital image, video and communication media. The term is not intended to perpetuate the assumption that online and offline realities can be separated. It expresses the idea that digital media do not necessarily have to be the primary vehicle of infringing acts. Digital media and mobile devices can also be used as a lure, a contextualising means of shaping intimacy and relationships or as an instrument to enforce silence about sexualised violence that has been initiated offline (Kärgel & Vobbe, 2019, p. 31)."

Peer Violence and Digital Media

Peer groups play an important role in adolescence. Young people usually actively establish membership in a peer group. In addition to determining social and gender identity(s), peer groups are important for belonging, recognition and establishing personal boundaries. Most of the time, peer groups are also where first sexual desires and intimacy take place. Sexual experiences, as well as experimenting with sexual behaviour, happen online and offline. Self-esteem and self-expression depend to a large extent on peer group status. Acceptance or rejection of one’s own identity relies on friends' reactions and feedback. Not infrequently, however, the peer group, or parts of it, also pose a potential risk. Pressure to conform, adapt or participate in competitive dynamics as well as forms of testing limits present themselves in violent patterns. Many young people are burdened by fears of being left out and potentially bullied. In the digital context, for example, likes and comments offer direct and public feedback. Online peer violence is public and usually has a wide reach, which causes a high level of stress for those affected (Schüngel, 2020). The continuum of (sexual) boundary violation and violent interactions in the digital context is broad (Maschke & Stecher, 2017).

In the following section, the focus will be on two phenomena that are of great relevance in our everyday pedagogical practice of prevention and intervention: recirculating nudes and cyberbullying (which can include several of the forms listed above).

Recirculating nudes – abusive sexting and dissemination of videos and images – in the peer group

To explain the phenomena of recirculating nudes and abusive sexting, one must first define sexting. "Sex" and "texting" come together in the digital context to form "sexting"; thus, communication and image are linked. Sending specially created "pics", "nudes" and "selfies" in a consensual framework is an established norm for many young people. The intentions are mostly of a sexual nature. In this way, young people can experiment with sexual self-portrayal and grapple with their own physicality and sexuality. Sexting also generates feedback about oneself. In the search for affirmation from the peer group, sexting is also practised among friends. Getting "pics" can increase one's status and recognition. But, publishing your own images can also help. In an American online survey, 13% of 13 to 19 year olds stated that they had sent or published sexualised messages or images in order to be noticed by others. As a result, it can be assumed that belonging and recognition in the peer group are highly relevant in the context of sexting. For girls, sexualised self-portrayal often carries negative consequences. If, for example, their pictures are forwarded against their consent, they are more often met with a lack of empathy and blame. Even the fact that non-consensual publication conflicts with the right to one's own image does not prevent girls in particular from being held responsible for their actions. Practical experience has shown that the erroneous assumption, "If you follow the rules, nothing will happen to you - if you don't, it's your own fault!" is still a widespread but very outdated assumption held by some professionals. What's more, the essence of the prevention message tends to warn young people not to send photos of themselves and to refrain from sexting. A quantitative study from Austria also shows that 81% of the young people surveyed stated that individuals who share their own image have to accept that it will appear on the Internet (Saferinternet.at 2015). These messages strengthen the dynamics of victim blaming[2]. They serve to legitimise young people's decisions to abusively forward other people's images and to avoid responsibility for criminal activities (Böhm et al. 2018, Vogelsang, 2017).

The breach of trust is the problem - not the nude picture.

When young people communicate in relationships, trust in their friends/partners is paramount, both online and offline. Regardless of the context, if a person sends a sexualised

[2] The guilt and thus the responsibility for a violent act is transferred from the perpetrator to the person affected (HaiteAid, 2021).

image/representation of themselves in confidence, this usually has a clearly defined recipient. If content is sent, forwarded/shared outside of a consensual chat, this is a clear breach of trust with possibly far-reaching consequences. The identity of the person who disseminated the original content often remains concealed, yet the pace of dissemination is unstoppably high. Additional routes of dissemination to other groups or contexts remain uncertain. If image material is forwarded without the consent of the person depicted, it has criminal relevance. According to Section 22 of the German Art Copyright Act, this is a violation of the right to one's own image and possibly a violation of the most personal area of life, according to Section 201a of the German Criminal Code. According to §184 (StGB), shared intimate images could be child pornographic images, the possession and distribution of which is punishable, as is storage of images by third parties. If the depicted person is under the age of 14, undressed or partially undressed in a provocative, sex-oriented posture, or if undressed genitals or buttocks are depicted in a sexually provocative manner, child pornographic content must be assumed. Possession, distribution and publication are punishable under Section 184b (StGB).

Cyberbullying in the peer group

Cyberbullying is bullying that is carried out via or with the help of the Internet. A person's reputation is damaged and demeaned, e.g. through negative (sexualised) comments, inappropriate or offensive messages or recordings, terrorising calls, theft of passwords or profile pictures.

Cyberbullying can take place at any time and anywhere - the violent perpetrators can change, and the bullying can come from a larger group, which can also continue to grow. Discrediting behaviour mostly takes place via social networks with rapid and far-reaching dissemination making it difficult for those affected to bear. In addition, the insulting and humiliating content can remain on the Internet for a very long time and periodically reappear, thus burdening those affected for the rest of their lives. A complete deletion is practically impossible, since the content may be shared/commented upon on numerous accounts. In the digital space, there is no direct contact between the person(s) who are bullying and the person who is being bullied - the consequences are often not directly visible and cannot be assessed by the aggressor, since the "power" of words, supposed jokes or image-based violence is often underestimated. Likewise, those who support violence are rarely aware of their role as reinforcers. If, as described above, we assume that adolescence is a time of trying and testing,

it would be disastrous to speak exclusively of perpetrators and victims. The consideration requires a more differentiated perspective rather than hasty prejudice. Nevertheless, boundary-violating behaviour must be identified and regulated in order to establish a boundary-preserving approach to working with children and adolescents.

However, criminal offences may exist, e.g. insult (§185 StGB), slander (§186 StGB) or defamation (§187 StGB).

Perpetrators of such violence are often minors and therefore cannot be prosecuted, i.e. supposedly go unpunished. Nevertheless, punishment under civil law can be imposed from the age of seven, e.g., a conversation with the police or the signing of a cease and desist declaration.

Recognising digital violence in the peer group

It is the act of violence itself that is blurred or made vague by mediatisation. This becomes noticeable, for example, in the immediate reaction and the responsibility of professionals to assess and evaluate violence in order to be able to intervene in a situation appropriately and assess possible risks. The aforementioned points are made more difficult by the fact that in peer groups or in a class, interacting with online media or communication is normal. Children and adolescents are well aware that embarrassing or hurtful incidents happen on virtual platforms, and a relatively high percentage have personally had negative experiences. There is no doubt that violations of sexual boundaries have become "tolerated", which makes it all the more difficult for young people to identify experiences of violence as such. This is where the need for action lies with professionals to protect against possible trivialisation, victim-blaming and normalisation of violence. The increasing digitalisation of young people's worlds should therefore be countered with reflective, victim-friendly support from adult caregivers. In all the diffusion of the multi-layered dynamics of digital violence, it is up to professionals (also in the sense of the protective order for young people) to recognise the need for action, to classify them professionally and to become active.

The issue is multifaceted

Mediatised sexualised violence causes concern in large part because it transcends time and space and presents as omnipresent. There is constant danger of being confronted (again), in an uncontrolled and violent manner, with material published on the Internet. This can start a new

spiral of violence, which not only represents ongoing experiences of powerlessness, episodic and repeated stress for those affected, but also a permanent risk of re-victimisation. Consequently, everyday media use after experiencing digital violence can also trigger a general reactivation of stress. Affected children and adolescents, who know of existing digital evidence of violence, such as photos or videos, are often afraid that in the course of publication/distribution they will be (repeatedly) blamed, which can lead to stigmatisation, humiliation and experiences of exclusion. Perpetrators of violence have the power to misrepresent and distort a situation within an affected person's social environment.

In addition to reduced self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness/worthlessness and declining (school) performance, affected persons are at risk of drug use, depression, anxiety, and thoughts of revenge and suicide. Experiencing digital violence threatens the individual's physical as well as mental health and often has an impact on in-person social constellations in classes/clubs. These traumatising effects result from the violation of one's personal rights and autonomy. Likewise, even in cases where appropriate intervention occurs, contact with the aggressor(s) and/or (digital) evidence of the violence can recur. Thus, the affected person requires clear positioning from their support system.

In the current EU co-financed project "ByeDV", we are working with a team from the SRH Hochschule Heidelberg, the DGfPI and three other specialist counselling centres to develop quality criteria for professionally dealing with mediatised sexualised violence against children and adolescents. These quality criteria address, among other things, adequate professional involvement in the context of prevention and intervention of mediatised peer violence.

Standards for intervention in mediatised peer violence

Instances of cyberbullying are often met with solution-oriented approaches, such as making amends, which in the case of sexualised mediatised peer violence can be interpreted as harmful to the victim (Vobbe, 2018). Such a response risks trivialising the situation, which can contribute additional stress to those affected. The existing power imbalance cannot be resolved by confronting the perpetrators of the crime.

One pillar of intervention practice, used in acute cases, is crisis intervention, alongside secondary and tertiary prevention. This includes the following:

- prioritisation of the needs and interests of those affected
- the offer of consistent and reliable (professional) support
- the greatest possible transparency of what is happening
- psychoeducation
- stabilisation

In accordance with the idea of self-efficacy, this involves supporting affected persons deal with feelings of guilt and efforts to manage their burdens as much as possible in a participatory manner. Keeping them informed of even the smallest aspects of what is happening, such as transparency around possible legal steps, can help those affected to create protective spaces for themselves and consider options for action (Vobbe & Kärgel, 2022).

Standards in the prevention of mediatised peer violence

Prevention units should provide information without presenting prohibitions or stirring up fears

Adults often feel insecure when it comes to new media. They grew up in an analogue world and have fewer touchpoints with the online platforms preferred by children and adolescents. Digital violence is not yet perceived as a serious problem in the adult world, as it supposedly "only" affects the virtual world. This is a fallacy. Even analogous boundary violations and assaults usually continue or are accompanied in the digital space and thus sustained in classrooms/social groups. This must be taken into account in everyday teaching.

Prevention programs must ultimately convey to children and adolescents that adults are competent confidants who are prepared to advocate for their protection and safety. The everyday reality of the younger generation should be understood in terms of a critical evaluation of the opportunities and risks present in the virtual space. This requires knowledge of young people's behaviours, dynamics of violence as well as the consequences to those affected. If young people’s experiences and perspectives are taken into consideration to involve them in prevention programs, if they are taken seriously as experts in their own living environments, the resulting qualitative exchange can spur reflection on risky behaviour or initiate thinking about boundary violation and intrusive behaviour.

The best scenario is to offer recurring prevention programs and reflect their content in personal attitudes and actions. For example, they can encourage people to design their own

media use in such a way that their privacy is not violated and consent is obtained before the publication of images, which of course can be withdrawn at any time. Online boundary violations and attacks can be addressed similarly to offline violations and called out as such - in doing so (the initiation of) violence becomes visible and the cycle can be thwarted - ultimately acknowledging the right to (digital) self-determination.

Ideally a culture would be established which addresses boundaries, moral courage and the roles of supporters / bystanders (witnesses to violence) who minimise or increase violence.

The aim of prevention is to give children and adolescents access to their emotions, wishes and needs so that they can develop their own concepts of friendship, love, (long-distance) relationships and intimacy. In addition, they can practise techniques for setting limits or learn so-called exit strategies, and consider questions such as, what helps me through situations in which I'm not thriving? How can I recognise an uncomfortable situation and leave it if possible? Can I trust my intuition? Are there options to distance myself from a situation?

An essential aspect of prevention is a fundamentally open and positive attitude towards young people's living environments. Possible questions about dialogue and critical self-reflection are as follows:

- What is my/my team’s attitude toward the use of digital media?
- Do I/we think about digital media as a reality of life for children and adolescents?
- What are my/our thoughts about children's rights in digital spaces?
- How do children and adolescents experience us as resources or confidants on the topic? (They have a good sense of who they can tell what to.) How competent do I feel as a resource or confidant? (Should I attend a training course on the topic? Does it require additional time from me?)

In summary, prevention concepts should be supplemented with the facets of mediatisation (sexualised) peer violence and applied accordingly, or to put it in the words of ByeDV:

take action against cyber sexual | beyond digital violence

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